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Twenty-third day of December 2004

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. R. + L.'.

JANENE PEISKER
TEAM LEADER EXAMINATION
SUPPORT AND SALES

Patent Title

Method and apparatus for disseminating heterogeneous data through branded electronic information delivery channels.

Inventors: Morwood, Gregory (Melbourne, Australia); Bagg, Alexander (Melbourne, Australia); Andrew, Robert (Melbourne, Australia)

Assignee: Microtoast Inc. (Wilmington, Delaware, United States of America)

Description

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention pertains to the distribution of electronic information distribution via electronic information networks using branded delivery channels. More particularly, this invention relates to the employment of an apparatus that can change its visual and aural characteristics to reflect the brand attributes associated with the content being accessed via the apparatus.

2. Background

Internet and e-mail users are swamped with information that is distributed via information delivery channels that fail to facilitate brand awareness for the content provider or provide feedback to the content provider of how the content is used. The need exists for a solution that enables various types of digital content to be packaged and delivered in the one environment that provides the ability to instantly change its visual and aural characteristics so as to constantly reflect the branding of the content provider and to monitor how recipients use the received content.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A method and apparatus for disseminating heterogeneous data through branded electronic information delivery channels is described herein. In one embodiment, a conglomerate apparatus is employed with three main elements: an authoring apparatus, a content hub and a client apparatus. The purpose of the conglomerate apparatus is to facilitate the delivery of multiple forms of digital content from a content service provider to a content recipient via a client apparatus that when employed by the content recipient will change its shape, colour and other visual and aural attributes so as to reflect branding specified by the content service provider. To achieve this, the content service provider uses the authoring apparatus to create sets of content items and then associate these content sets with brand attributes. The content service provider can also add control information to the content sets that can control the sequence in which the content recipients can access content. This content and branding information is then published by the content service provider at a content hub that is accessible to the intended content recipient. The content recipient can then access this content and brand information from the content hub. When viewing or otherwise making use of the content using the client apparatus, the branding attributes associated with the content are applied to the client apparatus so that the client apparatus's visual and aural characteristics will reflect the branding attributes intended by the content service provider. In one embodiment, the client apparatus also monitors the content

recipient's use of the content items and stores metrics about this usage within a database in the client apparatus. These metrics can then be sent back to the content service provider's content hub and then accessed by the content service provider for further analysis.

A practical example of the employment of the invention would be for an automobile manufacturing company to use the conglomerate apparatus to distribute information about its new range of vehicles to media representatives. Numerous content items taking such forms as documents outlining the specifications of the new vehicles, video footage of the vehicles' road handling, photographic images of the vehicles and dynamic links to internet pages related to the vehicles could be arranged to form a content set. Branding attributes could be associated with this content set and published on the content hub. The media representatives using the client apparatus could access the content and associated branding attribute information from the content hub. When the media representatives then use the client apparatus to view the content, the branding attributes would be applied such that the client apparatus would appear to be in the shape of one of the new model cars. The car-shaped client apparatus would display the automobile manufacturer's company logo and in the background it could play the company's theme tune. The front windscreen of this car-shaped client apparatus could display a short video footage of one of the new cars. A list of further content items would be displayed only after this short video was finished. When any of the content items are selected by the media representatives to be viewed, a car's engine sound would briefly play and the content would appear within an enlarged frame that also carried the automobile manufacturer's company logo and branded colour scheme. The metrics gathered by the client apparatus of the media representatives use of the content items would be sent back to the automobile manufacturer's content hub and the automobile manufacturer could access this information to assess which of the new vehicles generated the most interest with the media representatives.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention is illustrated by way of example and not limitation in the figures of the accompanying drawings, in which like references indicate similar elements and in which:

- FIG. 1 is a schematic of an example methodology;
- FIG. 2 is a schematic of example apparatus elements and interfaces (overview of the ToastPad apparatuses);
- FIG. 3 is a schematic of an example client apparatus in various shapes;
- FIG. 4 is a schematic of an example client apparatus element forms; and
- FIG. 5 is a schematic of an example client apparatus elements showing persistence of brand identifying attributes.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In the following detailed description numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. However, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that the present invention may be practiced without these specific details. In other instances well known methods, procedures, components, and apparatuses have not been described in detail so as not to obscure the present invention.

The ToastPad methodology uses a six-stage approach to the delivery of information from a content service provider to content subscriber – creation of content; wrapping of content with brand identifiers; publication of content and brand identifiers; collection of content and brand

identifiers; using content within a branded ToastPad; and collection of monitoring metrics. Within each of these stages there are additional steps and variations that are relevant depending on whether the content subscriber is a new or established subscriber to the content service provider.

Figure 1 shows each of the stages in the ToastPad methodology. The "content creation" stage 101 involves the creation of content items in any format that the content service provider chooses. The only constraint on the format of the content items is that they must be in a format that can be delivered via the ToastPad client apparatus (see section below on the ToastPad apparatus for further details). Content items can be any form of communication or information including but not limited to such items as text, image, video and audio files, diagrams and links to associated content and Internet URLs. During this stage, the content service provider can also choose to assign "sequence controls" to the content items, which have the effect of guiding the content recipient through the various content items within a content set such that the content items are used in a sequence intended by the content service provider.

The "wrapping of content with brand identifiers" stage 102 is where the content service provider creates, modifies or confirms the visual and aural attributes of the ToastPad that will be applied to the ToastPad client apparatus when using the content set via the ToastPad client application. The visual and aural attributes that can be applied to the ToastPad client apparatus include but are not limited to the shape of the ToastPad client apparatus, the colour schemes and logos applied to the façade and trays of the ToastPad client apparatus, the layout used to arrange and present content, and the manner in which the ToastPad transforms its layout in response to particular types of content, such as resizing windows in which content is displayed.

The "publication of content and brand identifiers" stage 103 is where the content service provider publishes a content set with its associated brand identifiers on one or more electronic information servers, referred to herein as content hubs, that are accessible to all the intended content recipients. A content set is a grouping of one or more content items that are published at the same time for distribution in total or part to one or more content recipients. This enables the content recipient to access the content set and associated brand identifiers.

The "collection of content and brand identifiers" stage 104 is where the content recipient uses the ToastPad client apparatus to collect new content sets and associated brand identifiers. If the content recipient is a first-time user, then the content recipient must first obtain a copy of the ToastPad client application and install it on their computing device and then subscribe as a recipient of content from one or more content service providers. For both first-time and existing users, once the ToastPad client apparatus is running on the content recipient's computing device, the client alerter apparatus within the ToastPad client apparatus will regularly check for updated content sets and brand identifiers at the content hubs of content service providers to which the content recipient is subscribed. Upon detecting such updated content sets or brand identifiers, the client alerter apparatus within the ToastPad client apparatus will: collect such updates from the respective content service providers content hubs; store these updates on the content recipient's computing device; and provide an alert to the content recipient that updates are available for use.

In the "use of content within a branded ToastPad" stage 105, the content recipient uses the ToastPad client apparatus to use content retrieved from the content service providers. The appearance of the ToastPad viewer apparatus within the ToastPad client apparatus, such as its shape, colour and banding, will reflect the brand identifiers linked to the particular content set being used at the time by the content recipient. For example, if the content recipient was using the ToastPad client apparatus to view and listen to content from a content service provider that was a telephone company, the appearance of the ToastPad viewer apparatus within the ToastPad client apparatus could take on the shape of a telephone and its colours could reflect the logos and branding designs of the telephone company and it could play a background audio file that reflects the telephone company's branded musical theme.

While using a content set, any "sequencing controls" applied to the content set by the content service provider will be applied, with the effect that the content recipient's sequence of using or interacting with the content will be guided through a sequence intended by the content service provider.

During the "use of content within a branded ToastPad" stage 105, the ToastPad client apparatus can also monitor and log metrics of the content recipient's use of the content. For example, the ToastPad client apparatus could track and record which content items were used or not used by the content recipient. These metrics are stored on the content recipient's computing device. The recording of these metrics can be disabled at the discretion of the content service provider or content recipient for reasons such as concerns over the privacy or confidentiality of such metrics.

In the "collection of monitoring metrics" stage 106, the log of the metrics of content recipient's use of the content, if available, is passed to the content hub of the content service provider whose content the metrics relate to. The content service provider can then access these logs for further analysis and reporting.

Figure 2 shows the ToastPad apparatus's three main elements: an authoring apparatus, a content hub, and a client apparatus. These three elements work together to facilitate the methodology described above. Each content service provider requires an authoring apparatus and a content hub. Every content recipient requires just one client apparatus, which can be used to access and use content from multiple content service providers.

The ToastPad authoring apparatus is comprised of several further sub-elements: the brand attributes apparatus 201; the content management apparatus 202; the user management apparatus 203; the distribution management apparatus 204; the publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus 205; and the user metrics apparatus 206.

The brand attributes apparatus 201, manages the brand identifiers that are to be applied to the ToastPad client apparatus when the content recipient uses the ToastPad client apparatus to use the content provided by the content service provider. The brand identifiers control the visual and aural elements of the client apparatus, including the shape and colours schemes of the ToastPad client apparatus's various components, the use of images and logos and the background audio to be played while the content recipient is making use of the content. They can make the ToastPad client apparatus look like a particular brand of car or telephone, like a house or an old-fashioned radio. They can enable background images and sounds to be played while the content recipient is making use of the content.

The content management apparatus 202 is used to manage the content items that are distributed to content recipients. These content items can be in any format, such as audio, image, text, video, dynamic links to Internet sites or any combination of formats. The content items are stored in the content database 209 along with other attributes pertaining to the content items, such as the source and version of the content item. The content management apparatus 202 enables the content service provider to select and arrange the content items to be incorporated into a content set that will eventually be published for distribution to content recipients. The content management apparatus 202 can also facilitate the sequencing, availability and interactivity of the content items, such that when a content recipient eventually makes use of the content set, the content recipient will be restricted to using or interacting with the content items in accordance with the sequence and manner defined by the content service provider.

The user management apparatus, 203 is used to manage the list of content recipients. Content recipient details are stored in the user database 207 and managed via the user management apparatus 203, enabling the content service provider to add, remove or amend content user details.

The distribution management apparatus 204 enables the content service provider to determine which content recipients will receive each content set. Drawing on data in the user database 207 and the content set database 210, the content service provider is also able to use the distribution management apparatus 204 to specify which content items within a particular content set each content recipient will receive, such that some content recipients may only receive a sub-set of all of the content items within a content set made available to other content recipients. Alternatively, the content service provider can choose not to restrict the distribution of content at all and can therefore make content sets publicly available to any content recipient, whether the content recipients' details are available within the content service provider's user database 207 or not.

The publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus 205 is used to publish information from the ToastPad authoring apparatus to the content hub and to retrieve user metrics data from the content hub to the ToastPad authoring apparatus. Information published to the content hub includes new or updated data from the user database 207, brand attributes database 208, content database 209 and content set database 210. The effect of publishing this data is to enable and manage the distribution of content with associated brand identifiers to content recipients. Examples of the sort of information that can be published include the publication of a new content set for distribution with an updated set of brand identifiers to a select group of content recipients; the removal from availability of an outdated content set; the addition of new content recipients to the user database 214; and the addition of new brand identifiers to an existing content set. When retrieving user metrics data from the content hub to the ToastPad authoring apparatus, data is drawn from the user metrics database 218 on the content hub and used to update data in the user metrics database 211 on the ToastPad authoring apparatus.

The user metrics apparatus 206 is used to view, analyse, generate reports from and otherwise make use of data within the user metrics database 211.

Figure 2 also shows the content hub is comprised of two sub-elements: the publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus 212 and the content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus 213.

The publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus 212 provides an information exchange mechanism between it and its counterpart within the ToastPad authoring apparatus, the publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus 205. The publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus 212 enables the content service provider that manages the content hub to add, delete or update data within the user database 214, brand attributes database 215, content database 216, content set database 217 and to retrieve data from the user metric database 218.

The content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus 213 provides an information exchange mechanism between the content hub and the client alerter apparatus within the ToastPad client apparatus on the various content recipients' computing devices. Based on distribution rules set within the user database 214, the content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus 213 allows authorised content recipients to access updates to content and brand attributes contained within the brand attributes database 215, the content database 216 and the content set database 217. The content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus 213 also facilitates the uploading of metrics from the various ToastPad client apparatuses used by the content recipients accessing the content hub.

Figure 2 also shows the ToastPad client apparatus is comprised of two sub-elements, the client alerter apparatus 219 and the ToastPad viewer apparatus 220.

The client alerter apparatus 219 is used to periodically check for new or updated content from content service providers by connecting to the content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus 213 at the content hubs of the content service providers to which the content recipient is subscribed. It is possible for any one content recipient to be subscribed to receive content from one or more content service providers. The client alerter apparatus 219 therefore stores details in the subscribers database 221 so that the client alerter can use this information to access content

from all content service providers to which the content recipient is subscribed. The information contained in the subscribers database 221 relating to each content service provider includes such items as the location of the content service provider's content hub within an electronic information network; the authentication details required for the content recipient to access the content hub and the frequency with which the client alerter apparatus 220 should connect to the content hub to check for new or updated content.

When the client alerter apparatus accesses a content hub, if it detects that there is new or updated content available, then the client alerter apparatus 219 will take a copy of this information from the content hub's brand attributes database 215, content database 216 and content set database 217 and store this information in the corresponding databases in the ToastPad client apparatus, the brand attributes database 222, content database 223 and content set database 224. The client alerter application will then alert the content recipient, through such means as the use of icons, sounds, messages on the content recipient's computing device or other devices used by the content recipient, so that the content recipient will become aware that new content is available from one or more content service providers. The content recipient will then be able to access the client alerter apparatus 219 to review what new content is available and to access that content via the ToastPad viewer apparatus 220.

The client alerter apparatus 219 is also used to publish user metrics to content hubs. The user metrics are recorded within the user metrics database 225 and provide details on how the content recipient uses the content provided by the various content service providers. The information stored in the user metrics database 225 can cover any aspect of the content recipient's interaction with the content and can include for example such items as which content items are used by the content recipient and how often, in what order and for how long they are used. When the client alerter apparatus 219 accesses the content hub of a content service provider, the client alerter apparatus can access the user metrics related to the use of content from the respective content service provider from the user metrics database 225 and publish this user metrics information to the content hub, where it is then stored within the aggregated data in the content hub's user metrics database 218. It is also possible for the user metrics gathering and publishing functionality to be disabled for particular content service providers should there be concerns by any party related to the process, such as concerns about the privacy or confidentiality of such data collection.

The ToastPad viewer apparatus 220 is used by content recipients to use the content provided by content service providers. The ToastPad viewer apparatus relies on the content recipient's computing device to have other apparatuses already installed such that the specific content items can be used. Such other apparatuses can include audio and video playing apparatuses, Internet browsing apparatuses, word processing and office automation apparatuses, image viewing apparatuses and e-mail apparatuses. The ToastPad viewer apparatus 220 will select the appropriate other apparatus to make use of the content items based on the format of the content item.

When accessing content from a particular content service provider, the ToastPad viewer apparatus 220 will first select the brand identifiers from the brand attributes database 222 that relate to the particular content set being accessed. These brand identifiers information will control the visual and aural aspects of the ToastPad viewer apparatus so that its shape, colour, sounds, feel and banding will reflect the branding associated to the particular content set being used at the time by the content recipient.

Figure 3 shows some example shapes that the ToastPad viewer apparatus can take. The ToastPad viewer apparatus can be styled to look like a hand-held computing device 301 and 302, or like a telephone 303 and 304. The shape of the ToastPad viewer can be styled to reflect the banding of the content service provider, such as a car shape for a car dealer, a telephone shape for a telecommunications company or a photocopier shape for an office products company. The functional control icons 305, used to enable such things as controlling the playing of video content

items or opening and closing content set trays 302, can be incorporated into the styling of the ToastPad viewer apparatus, such that they may form part of the object being represented, such as the buttons on a telephone or the handles on a car door.

Figure 4 shows the various forms that the ToastPad viewer apparatus make take. In its simplest form 401, the ToastPad viewer apparatus takes the shape of an object, such as a telephone, or a car, and provides the facility to make use of certain content items within that form, such as viewing video content or listening to audio content. The ToastPad viewer apparatus may also include a tray 402, which can be used to display such things as a summary list of content items within a particular content set or icons to facilitate the launching of associated apparatuses, such as instant messaging or e-mail. A content set may have multiple linked trays associated to it. The trays can also provide a means through which the content controls associated with a content set or content items can be managed. For example, the list of content items on a tray may be restricted until a particular content item is accessed by the content recipient, after which a fuller list of content items may be visible on the tray or additional trays might be available. Individual content items can be viewed within frames 403 appropriately sized for the content item. In this form, the layout of the other elements of the ToastPad viewer apparatus can be repositioned to improve the use of space within the content recipient's computing device's display.

Figure 5 shows the use of persistent brand identifying attributes in all forms of the ToastPad viewer apparatus. Company brand icons, trademarks and logos 501; and colour themes, stationery, watermarks and audio elements 502; are used in all forms of the ToastPad viewer apparatus. When specific content items are accessed using other apparatuses not part of the ToastPad client apparatus, they are displayed within frames 503 that retain the brand identifying attributes 501 and 502.

Whereas many alterations and modifications of the present invention will be comprehended by a person skilled in the art after having read the foregoing description, it is to be understood that the particular embodiments shown and described by way of illustration are in no way intended to be considered limiting. Therefore, references to details of particular embodiments are not intended to limit the scope of the claims, which in themselves recite only those features regarded as essential to the invention.

Thus, a method and apparatus for disseminating heterogeneous data through branded electronic information delivery channels has been described.

Attachments: Five diagrams as follows:

- Figure 1 – A schematic of an example methodology;
- Figure 2 – A schematic of example apparatus elements and interfaces (overview of the ToastPad apparatuses);
- Figure 3 – A schematic of an example client apparatus in various shapes;
- Figure 4 – A schematic of an example client apparatus element forms; and
- Figure 5 – A schematic of an example client apparatus elements showing persistence of brand identifying attributes.

Claims

What is claimed is:

1. A method for disseminating heterogeneous data through branded electronic information delivery channels, as herein described with reference to accompanying drawings, that combines:
 - (a) electronic information content intended for access and use by content recipients using an apparatus on a computing device, with
 - (b) brand identifying attributes that can control the apparatus through which each content recipient views or otherwise makes use of the electronic information content such that the branding is reflected in the apparatus's visual and aural characteristics.
2. The method of claim 1, where the method may further comprise one or more of the following steps:
 - (a) associating control elements to the electronic information content such that these control elements control the sequence in which the content can be viewed or otherwise accessed by the content recipient, and
 - (b) using an apparatus on the content recipient's computing device that will monitor and record metrics about the content recipient's use of the electronic information content and will revert such gathered metrics to the provider of the content.
3. An apparatus that facilitates the dissemination of heterogeneous data through branded electronic information delivery channels, as herein described with reference to accompanying drawings, the apparatus comprising:
 - (a) an authoring apparatus for associating brand identifiers with electronic information content and publishing such content with associated brand identifiers,
 - (b) a content hub that facilitates the exchange of content with associated brand identifiers, and
 - (c) a client apparatus for viewing and otherwise using content with associated brand identifiers.
4. The apparatus of claim 3, where the authoring apparatus further comprises the following components:
 - (a) a brand attributes apparatus for managing the brand identifiers that are applied to the client apparatus when the content recipient uses the client apparatus to view or otherwise use electronic information content provided by the content service provider, such brand identifiers controlling the visual and aural characteristics of the client apparatus;
 - (b) a content management apparatus for managing the electronic information content so as to be able to group one or more content items into a set of content for publication and distribution to content recipients; and
 - (c) a publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus for passing electronic information content with associated brand identifiers to the content hub.

5. The apparatus of claim 4, wherein the content management apparatus may also be used to facilitate the sequencing, availability and interactivity of the electronic information content items, such that when a content recipient eventually makes use of a set of content, the content recipient will be restricted to using or interacting with the content items in accordance with the sequence and manner defined within the content management apparatus.
6. The apparatus of claim 4, wherein the publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus may also be used to facilitate the retrieval of user metrics information from the content hub.
7. The apparatus of claim 3, where the authoring apparatus may further comprise one or more of the following components:
 - (a) a user management apparatus for managing the list of authorised recipients of electronic information content;
 - (b) a distribution management apparatus for determining which recipients will receive particular items or sets of electronic information content, including the facility to specify which content items within a particular content set each content recipient will receive, such that some content recipients may only receive a sub-set of all of the content items within a content set made available to other content recipients; and
 - (c) a user metrics apparatus for viewing, analysing, generating reports on and otherwise making use of user metrics data gathered from client apparatuses.
8. The apparatus of claim 3, wherein the content hub further comprises a publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus for receiving information from the authoring apparatus, including electronic information content with associated brand identifiers.
9. The apparatus of claim 8, wherein the content hub may further comprises a publishing and metrics retrieval apparatus for passing information to the authoring apparatus, including user metrics information.
10. The apparatus of claim 3, wherein the content hub further comprises a content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus for passing information to the client apparatus, including electronic information content with associated brand identifiers.
11. The apparatus of claim 10, wherein the content hub may further comprises a content retrieval and metrics upload apparatus for retrieval of information from the client apparatus, including of user metrics information.
12. The apparatus of claim 3, where the client apparatus further comprises the following components:
 - (a) a client alerter apparatus for periodically checking for new or updated electronic information content at one or more content hubs and retrieving such content with its associated brand identifiers, and
 - (b) a viewer apparatus for viewing or otherwise using the electronic information content retrieved from a content hub while at the same time taking on the visual and aural attributes of the brand identifiers associated with the respective content.
13. The apparatus of claim 12, where the client alerter apparatus may further be used to provide one or more of the following functions:

- (a) providing an alert through a variety of means, including but not limited to the use of icons, sounds or messages on the content recipient's computing device or other devices used by the content recipient, so that the content recipient will become aware that new electronic information content is available within the client apparatus; and
 - (b) passing user metrics information to the content hub.
14. The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the viewer apparatus may further be used to monitor the content recipient's use of the electronic information content items and to store such metrics about this usage within a database within the client apparatus.

Abstract

The present invention discloses a method and apparatus for disseminating heterogeneous data through branded electronic information delivery channels. In one embodiment, a conglomerate apparatus is employed with three main elements: an authoring apparatus, a content hub and a client apparatus. The purpose of the conglomerate apparatus is to facilitate the delivery of multiple forms of digital content from a content service provider to a content recipient via a client apparatus that when employed by the content recipient will change its shape, colour and other visual and aural attributes so as to reflect branding specified by the content service provider. To achieve this, the content service provider uses the authoring apparatus to create sets of content items and then associate these content sets with brand attributes. The content service provider can also add control information to the content sets that can control the sequence in which content can be accessed by the content recipients. This content and branding information is then published by the content service provider at a content hub that is accessible to the intended content recipient. The content recipient can then access this content and brand information from the content hub. When viewing or otherwise making use of the content using the client apparatus, the branding attributes associated with the content are applied to the client apparatus so that the client apparatus's visual and aural characteristics will reflect the branding attributes intended by the content service provider. In one embodiment, the client apparatus also monitors the content recipient's use of the content items and stores metrics about this usage within a database in the client apparatus. These metrics can then be sent back to the content service provider's content hub and then accessed by the content service provider for further analysis.

Attachments: Five diagrams as follows:

- Figure 1** – A schematic of an example methodology;
- Figure 2** – A schematic of example apparatus elements and interfaces (overview of the ToastPad apparatuses);
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- Figure 4** – A schematic of an example client apparatus element forms; and
- Figure 5** – A schematic of an example client apparatus elements showing persistence of brand identifying attributes.

Figure 1 - A schematic of an example methodology

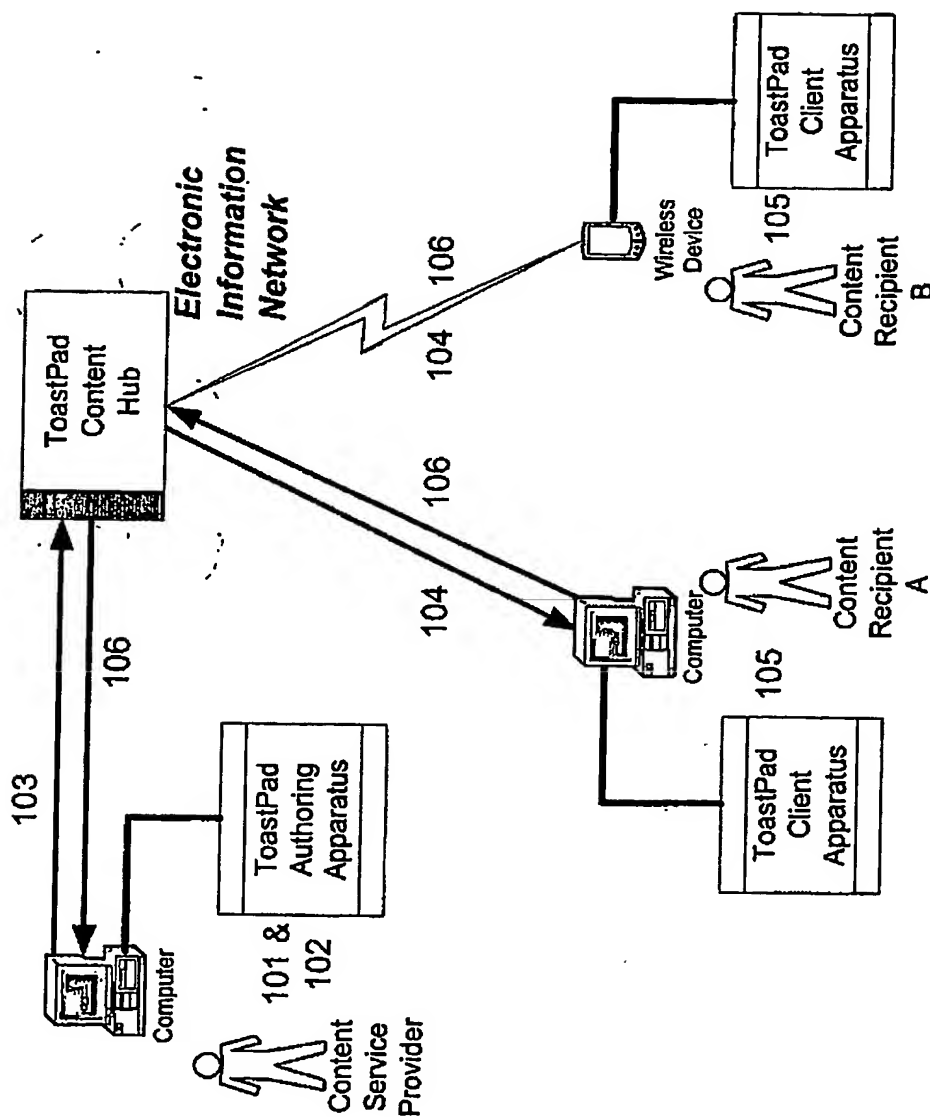


Figure 2 — A schematic of example apparatus elements and interfaces (overview of the ToastPad apparatuses)

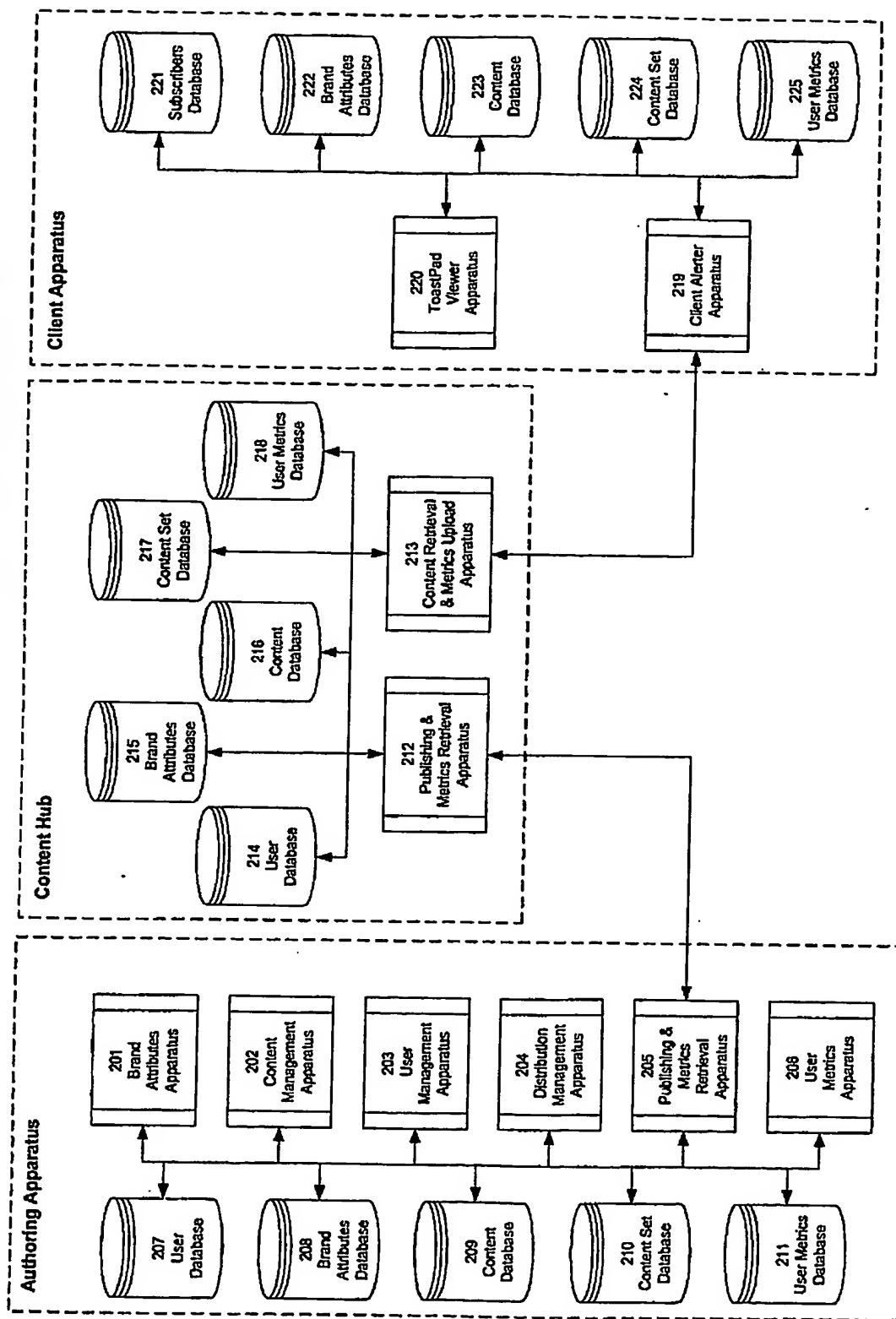


Figure 3 - A schematic of example client apparatus in various shapes

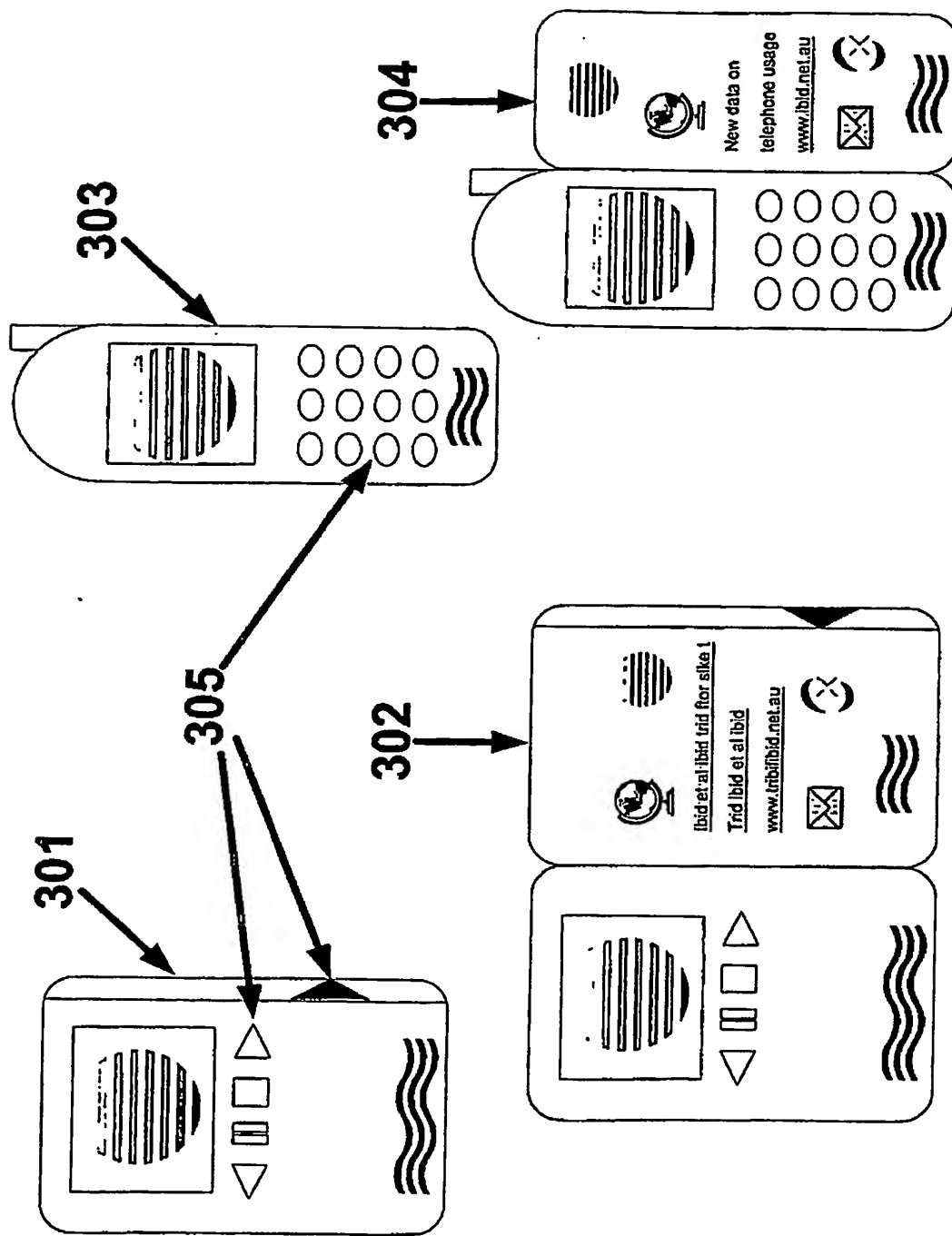


Figure 4 - A schematic of example client apparatus elements forms

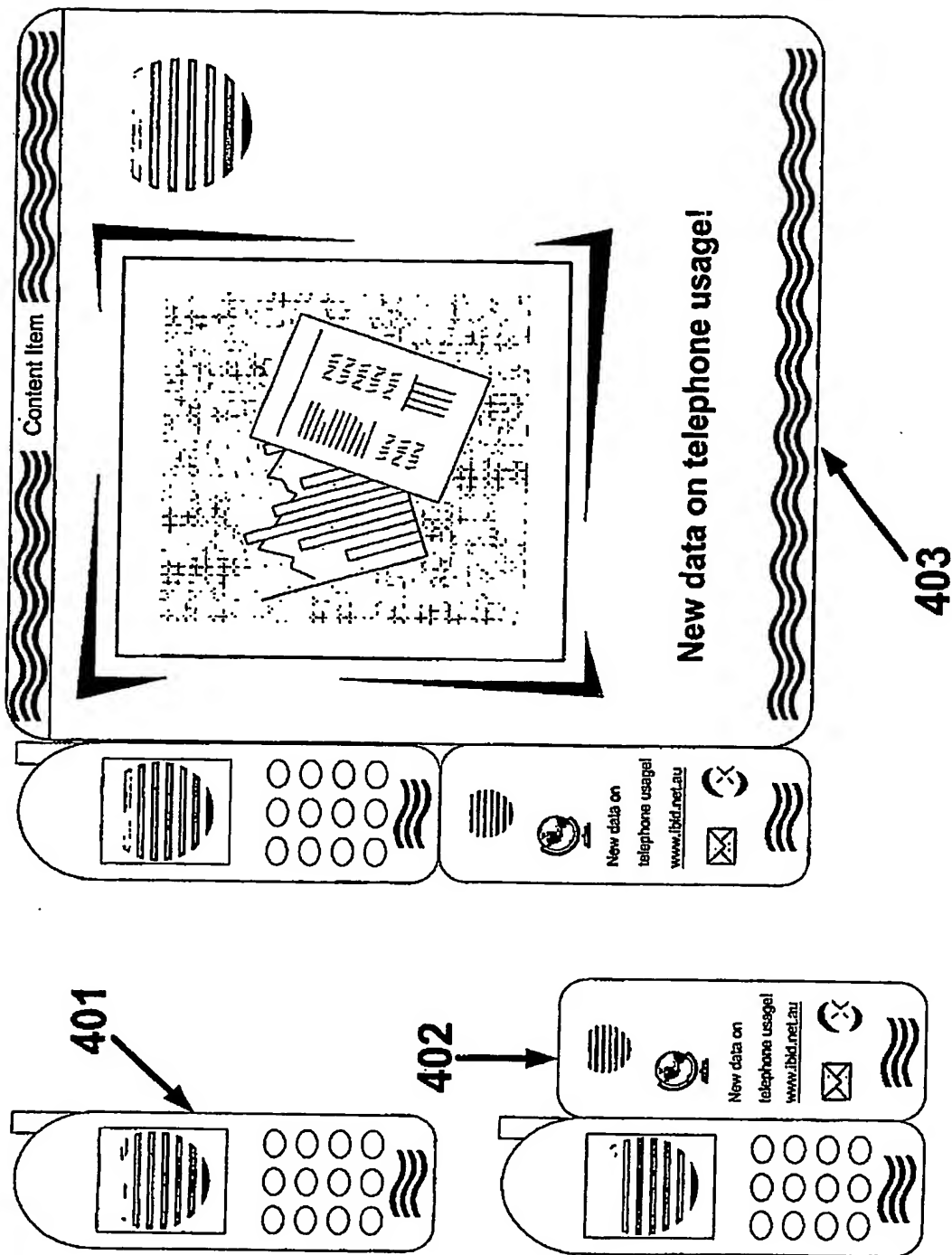
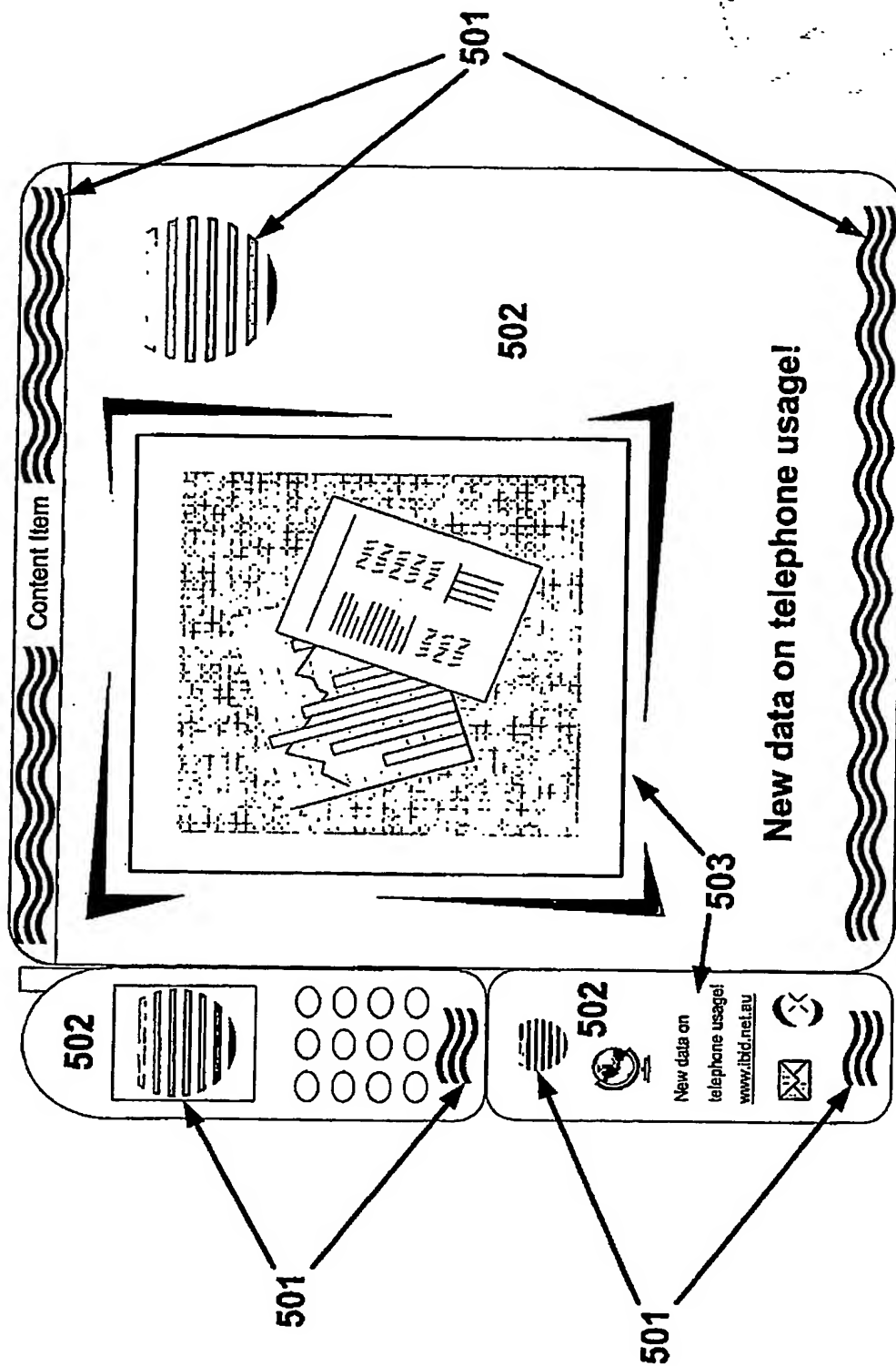


Figure 5 - A schematic of example client apparatus elements showing persistence of brand identifying attributes



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